

Is There a Lutheran Hermeneutics?

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[From *The Lively Function of the Gospel*, in The Caemmerer Festschrift, St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1966, p. 81-97. Later published in The Promising Tradition: A Reader in Law-Gospel Reconstructionist Theology, ed. By Edward H. Schroeder, St. Louis, Missouri, 1973. Reprinted with permission.
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Is there a distinctively Lutheran interpretation of the Scriptures? In his recent book *The Holy Spirit and Modern Thought*, Lindsay Dewar (an Anglican) says the answer is Yes. At least in Luther himself, says he, there is a distinctive and unique hermeneutics at work—and it is a bad one.

Luther was essentially a man of one idea; and that was Justification by Faith....It is this “one-track-mindedness” which makes Luther so unsatisfactory as a Biblical commentator, despite his phenomenal knowledge of the text of the Scriptures. And it was this which gave the Reformation at the outset such an unfortunate theological bias.... “Exegesis was not Luther’s strong point, and his commentaries bristle with faults. They are defective and prolix; full of bitter controversy and one-sided.”¹

It is my contention that Canon Dewar is right in his insight into Luther’s “one-sided” interpretation of the Scriptures, but I think the one-sidedness is commendable.

In this chapter I want to dwell a bit on Luther’s way of

interpreting the Scriptures and then to look at the Lutheran Confessions as collected in *The Book of Concord*, specifically the fourth article of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, in order to get at what is unique and distinctive in the Lutheran interpretation of Scripture.

Even though Lutherans are not bound to Luther, we must devote some attention to this one-sidedness of Luther, because it directly affects the statements of the later confessions on the way Scripture ought to be used and the way the confessions themselves actually do use the Bible as they go about interpreting it.

I. LUTHER

The starting point for the Reformation in Western Catholicism was an exegetical discovery by a man whose official title was “doctor of the Holy Scriptures.” His discovery centered on the meaning of the Biblical term “righteousness of God.” (In English the word *righteousness* does not normally call to mind the word *justification*, because many of our English words come from a Latin family tree and many others from the Anglo-Saxon. But in the native tongues of the German Reformation the two terms automatically go together and almost sound like each other: in German, *Rechtfertigung* and *Gerechtigkeit*; and in Latin, *justitia* and *justificatio*.)

It was initially in his lecturing to students on the Psalms and then later in his lectures on Romans that the Biblical answer came to Luther’s question: What is the “righteousness of God”? Medieval theology had taught him correctly that no one can stand before God (neither today nor on the Last Day) unless one has God’s own righteousness. And the general conclusion was: Get busy! But Luther’s great discovery was that God wants to give me that very necessary righteousness as a present, gratis, so that

I can indeed stand muster before Him, not only on the Last Day but every day of my life from here to eternity. The name of that gratuitous present of God's own righteousness is Jesus Christ. So the "surprise" of Christianity, the unexpected Good News, is that although people do have to have God's righteousness, the righteousness is gratis, *sola gratia*. The name of this surprise—this secret, marvel, mystery, and wonder which no one ever could have guessed—is Jesus Christ. Hence, *solus Christus*. The mode by which the free gift becomes my gift is the *faithfulness* of God which evokes my trust (*sola fides*). Consequently for Luther "righteousness of God," "Jesus Christ," and "justification by grace through faith" are all synonyms. They all refer to the one heart of the entire matter of Christianity.

If we have everything else in the Christian heritage, all the other articles of faith, but do not have this, we have nothing. At least, we have nothing specifically Christian to stand on. The opposite is also true. So long as we still have this one gratis gift, we may let everything else go—"life, goods, fame, child, and wife"—and we have not lost out on anything. In practice Luther applied this line from "A Mighty Fortress" to theology itself. If a supposed article of faith has nothing to do with this one article, it will become a competitor with the *solus Christus*. Whatever we let go without letting go of this one gracious gift is no real loss; we are still fully and truly Christian, and we dare let no one convince us we are not. If someone tries to do so, he is criticizing not us but our Lord Jesus Christ.—the consequences of which, for the critic, are disastrous.

As far as the history of Western Christian theology was concerned, Luther's discovery brought St. Paul's theology of the righteousness of God back into the center of theological conversation after a very long hibernation. Thus it is no

surprise when the Lutheran Confessions in the following years give prime attention to this theology of God's righteousness. But here something happens which Joachim Beckmann calls unique in the history of Christian theology up until that time.² The Lutheran confessors do not say: Here is one important element in the total package of Christian theology that has been lost, a brick that has fallen out of the edifice of the edifice of Christian theology, and now we desire to have it put back where it belongs so that the package may be complete. They do not treat this one as one article among the several important articles of faith, but they confess that it is the only article of faith. Even when we read the confessors' discussions of other articles, we soon become aware that in all their varied assertions and affirmations they have only one confession, one article, which stands out as the recurring and monotonous theme under all the variations. Later it was even called "the article by which the church stands or falls" (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*). Medieval theology before the Reformation (at least all the way back to Augustine and perhaps all the way back to the so-called "apostolic fathers" of the early second century) had considered the Christian faith to be composed of many articles, gathered together, e.g., in the creed, and drawn from the Holy Scriptures. At the very least, there were *three* articles of faith as represented by the three articles of the creed. Others saw the Apostle's Creed itself as containing at least twelve articles (one from each apostle), all of which were part of the total Christian package. The articles of *faith* presented in the creed were articles of faith because God had revealed them in the Holy Scriptures as a *philosophia coelestis*.

This notion that there are numerous articles of faith goes hand in hand with a corresponding notion of what the Bible is. It amounts to something like this: The Bible is the source book for all the things God has revealed for the heavenly philosophy,

which Christians acknowledge in the numerous things (articles) that they confess as being and belonging to the Christian faith. Since the Lutherans shifted the concept of Christian theology from numerous articles of faith to one and only one basic and foundational article, we ought not be surprised when they also make a shift in their understanding of the Scriptures. The shift can be seen in the actual use they make of this Book. It still functions as source, of course, but a source unique and different from the kind of source book it had been for theology up until that time. Let us now try to see how the Reformation discovery resulting from Luther's study of the Bible affected what Lutherans say about the Bible.

The Reformation discovery of the one article of faith in all Christian theology led the Reformers to a renewed concentration on the Bible. There had been important Biblical work in preceding centuries, but the Reformers had a distinctive reason for getting back to the Bible. Their distinctive reason, by the way, was not their conviction of the plenary verbal inspiration of the Bible, which of course they did acknowledge. The Reformer's distinctive reason for getting back to the Bible was a bit roundabout. Joachim Beckmann traces the sequence as follows: With the rediscovery of the Gospel of the righteousness of God (*gratia, Christus, fides*), verbal communication of this gift of God becomes the central means of grace. The term *Word of God* designates the one central means of grace whereby the gift is transmitted to people, whereby the benefits of Christ are conveyed to the intended beneficiaries. This phrase, *Word of God*, is used synonymously with the word *Gospel*, and when the Reformers use it they are not thinking first of all the book called the Bible. In fact in the Smalcald Articles when Luther is mentioning the many forms in which this one Word of God comes to people he mentions five different forms of this one means of grace, and not one of them is the Scriptures. However, it is the

Reformers' conviction of the centrality of this one Word of God (Gospel) which soon sends them back to Scriptures—but sends them back in a new way with a new question, a question which had not been central to the church's searching of the Scriptures for many centuries, even in the great medieval centers of Biblical studies. The question which the Reformers addressed to the Scriptures was this: What can you tell us about the righteousness of God, which we must have in order to live?

Even the sacraments—which in the medieval church were the chief (if not sole) means of grace—are subsumed in Luther's theology to this one means of grace: Word of God, the verbalized communication of the surprise gift. Thus, for example, in the Small Catechism he says that the words "given and shed for you for the remission of sins" are the chief item in the Eucharist. In place of the priestly sacramental celebrant the verbally communicating preacher becomes the indispensable professional church worker. Preaching becomes once more, as it had been in the early church, the chief office in the church. The most important consideration in the training of professional church workers is whether or not they know the Gospel and can convey it. This is the chief task of the church. Anything else the professional churchperson may have learned before which bypasses this one task is irrelevant and useless. The chief homework of the church in order to get that Gospel known and conveyed is biblical exegesis. So the chief task of theological education is to teach students of theology (and the laity too) how to work with the Bible, so that God's verbally communicated gift can move out from the book into the lives of people. That means getting the Word of God (Christ) out of the Word of God (Bible), namely, getting *Him* out of it. Consequently, theological education in Wittenberg is restructured to focus on this new center. All validly Christian theological study becomes Biblical study. There is finally no Lutheran theology which is not

biblical theology, but always Biblical study for reasons beyond itself. The Bible is the center of study because of its witness to the primary element in Christianity, the gracious gift. Since there is no other foundation for the church than this one Word of God, there can be no alternative foundation for the church's theology.

The Reformers worked out the consequences of their understanding of the bible in the conflicts which God brought to them. And we ought not forget that the opponents on the radical left (Anabaptists, *Schwaermer*, Spiritualists, Sacramentarians) were at least as instrumental in forcing the Reformers to some of their convictions as were the Romanists on the right. This is especially true for the Reformers' position on the Scriptures.

Let us now turn to some of the hermeneutic consequences which ensued from the Reformation discovery of the righteousness of God.

1. *Sola Scriptura*: Although this expression is surely one which Luther would have accepted, it achieved greatest prominence among the second-generation Lutherans in their conflicts with the Roman assertion (publicized at Trent) about Scripture and tradition. What did the Lutherans mean with *sola Scriptura*? Did they want to say that this is the only valid source of doctrine because it is the only inspired source? For Luther at least that was surely not the case. It is not the special inspiration of the Scriptures but the necessity of preaching *solus Christus* which makes him say *sola scriptura*. Since the Biblical Scriptures are the oldest and most original apostolic and prophetic witness to this Christ who is the *solus* content of preaching, therefore they too are characterized as *sola*. Because the Scriptures have the unique character of being the first and most ancient witness to the one Word of God, they cannot be anteceded if one wants to work with sources for the church's one

task—verbal communication of the free gift of righteousness. This is why the Scriptures are authoritative. This is why we dare call them Word of God: because the one righteousness of God is contained and conveyed in that original apostolic testimony about Christ. And if it is not, we are lost. We have no access to the Word of God (Him) except the Word of God (it), the witness of the apostles and prophets.

2. *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres* (Scripture is its own interpreter) This sentence is also formulated in confrontation with that Roman tradition which held that the Scriptures are a closed book until the authorized interpreter (ultimately the Roman Pontiff) says what they mean. Luther personally encountered this tradition in his own life, and the subordination of the Scriptures to the ecclesiastical teaching authority had in fact incarcerated the Scriptures. They could no longer say what they wanted to say, but only what the Roman see would let them say. Rome argued that this was necessary because of an *a priori* assumption that the Scriptures were a dark book (cf. Erasmus) and not transparent at all. Luther asserted the contrary: They are clear, simple, transparent. Of course this assertion is directly connected with the one article of the Christian faith which was central to the Reformation discovery: The Scriptures are clear, simple, and transparent in their proclamation concerning the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ. Since that is the central item which God wants to convey to people, it does come across loud and clear in the Scriptures. If we come to Scripture asking the kinds of questions for which the gracious righteousness of God is the answer, then there is no problem in our getting a clear answer. If we come with any other question, then the Scriptures are indeed opaque, dark, and shrouded. When the Lutheran Confessions pick up this notion and talk about “using the clear passages to interpret the difficult ones,” they do not mean using the simple sentences to interpret

the compound and complicated ones. What they do mean is using the passages which clearly express the one article of righteousness (even though they sometimes are the most complicated sentences grammatically) to get at the meaning of some others which are not so clear—grammatically clear, yes, but not clear in their expression of this one central message.

3. *Christ the Lord of the Scriptures*. In contrast to the Roman assertion that the church was the master of the Scriptures and in contrast to the Enthusiasts' assertion that the internal Spirit was the Lord of all the Scriptures, Luther asserted an audacious one-sided (Canon Dewar is right) concentration on Christ Himself. Christ is the *scopus generalis scripturae*, the actual and eventual target of everything in the bible, Old Testament included. If it were not for Christ, we would not have a Scripture. He said it Himself in John's gospel, "Searching the Scriptures" has one reason: "They are they which testify of Me." If we are looking for something else in the Scriptures, not only will we have a difficult time with plenty of "dark passages," but we will not even discover the Scriptures at all. A person who reads the Declaration of Independence to discover what colonial English grammar was may well find an answer his question, but we would hardly say he had discovered the Declaration of Independence for what it wanted to be. If we succeed in getting a message out of a Biblical text and in doing so avoid hearing or saying something about the one target of all Scripture, God's gracious righteousness in Christ, then we have performed an un-Lutheran exegesis which in itself is not so bad if it were not for the fact it is an unbiblical one besides.

Seeing Christ as the Lord of the Scriptures protects one from Biblicism. When the Bible is not viewed as heading for this one sole target, then it becomes a lawbook for doctrines and ethics which is best interpreted by the person who has the most

spiritual insight to get the real spirit out of the letters of the words. That is why Biblicism and enthusiastic spiritualism go hand in glove. It takes the Biblical text and interprets and applies it to people's lives without first "forcing" the text to hit the one target (*scopus*) and then picking the text up again, so to speak, "on the rebound." Or one might also say: Biblicism seeks to apply a text directly to human lives without running it through the sieve of Christ, the sieve of the gracious righteousness, without first presenting it before its own Lord.

When Luther is under attack, he can take this conviction of Christ's lordship over the Scriptures and use it in the most impudent fashion, especially in his critical words on certain Biblical texts. On one occasion he says: When the opponents martial the Scriptures against Christ and against the Gospel, I fight back with Christ against the Scriptures. Similarly, his word about the "straw epistle" of James and similarly derogatory remarks about other Biblical texts all stem from this conviction. This is the famous *Christum treiben* assertion. Whatever "urges Christ" is the apostolic Word of God, God's gracious righteousness. If it does not do that, then it is not the *apostolic* Word of God—even it is in the Bible, even if St. Paul himself wrote it, and even if it should qualify on other grounds as an authentic word from God. For apostolic Word of God is limited to that which the apostles were authorized to speak by their Lord when He commissioned (*apostello*) them. The mandatory content of that apostolically authorized word is the Commissioner Himself. Hence only *Christum treiben* can qualify as the "apostolic" Word.

4. *The unitary meaning of Scripture.* This is asserted by Luther in contrast to the fourfold meaning of Scripture which he himself, as a product of medieval Biblical scholarship, had practiced. Especially two of these four meanings, the literal and the spiritual (historical and allegorical), had conditioned

medieval exegesis ever since Origen. Because Jesus is the tangible historical Word of God in person, therefore the actual historical, literal meaning of the texts of Scripture conveys to us the one central article of the faith. There is no “spiritual” meaning that is above and beyond or deeper or more concealed than this one historically incarnate Gospel in person. A search for *deus absconditus* behind or beyond *deus revelatus* is not impossible, but is always done at one’s own peril. Because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ, there is no additional meaning that is behind or beyond the actual words and acts of the Word of God incarnate. The exegetical task does not require that I spiritualize the grubby words of the apostles and prophets in order to get back closer to what God *really* wants to say, for God Himself has already done the revealing of what He really wants to say. He has moved His “spiritual” donation into material, historical form so that it (the righteousness)—or better, He (Christ)—can penetrate to us.

In the final analysis the desire somehow to get back through the historical, tangible words and events to a spirit behind them constitutes a vote of no-confidence in God’s own revelatory ability. It is an act of *hybris* wherein we presume to penetrate the God-human communication barrier in order to grasp God, thus implying that He cannot get through to us without our help. In Luther’s terms this is *theologia gloriae*, the sinful and inordinate lust to view the *dues nudus*. It is a hermeneutical form of original sin. The “mysteries” of God are not hidden behind the words, but they are taken out of hiding simply by what the words literally say of Christ’s person and work.

II. THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

All of the above hermeneutical implications regarding Scripture

stem from the rediscovered *solus Christus, sola gratia, sola fides*. These are not the three new articles of the Lutheran creed, but three ways of referring to the one righteousness of God, the only one that counts. It is Christ-righteousness and that is all. It is gratis-righteousness and that is all. It is faith-righteousness and that is all. What this rediscovery did for the Reformers' actual interpretation of Scripture can be seen in Article IV of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. Melanchthon says in these confessional documents that the article of the gracious righteousness of God is the key to the Holy Scriptures. The reason the Roman Catholic critics cannot understand Scripture although they quote it left and right against the Lutherans, is that nowhere in all of their theology do they have this key. Consequently, they cannot be expected to get "inside" the written Word of God.

Lutherans must remember that after the Augsburg Confession was presented in 1530, the Roman response which was soon forthcoming (*Confutatio*) did not quote Thomas and Aristotle to prove that the Lutherans were wrong. Instead, the Roman opponents argued *sola scriptura*! In response the Augustana's Article IV on Justification they said, "It is entirely contrary to Holy Scripture to deny that our works are meritorious." "Their [the Lutherans'] ascription of justification to faith alone is diametrically opposed to the truth of the Gospel..." That Melanchthon was well aware of this critique from *sola scriptura* which they were making is seen in the preface to his own response to the *Confutatio*, his Apology, where he notes: "Our opponents brag that they have refuted our Confession from the Scriptures."³ So what we actually have in the whole Apology is the first explicit attempt at stating the Lutheran principles for interpreting Scripture. It is the first expressly Lutheran hermeneutics in action.

This hermeneutics is especially visible in Apology IV, since it

was on the doctrinal questions in that article that the opponents thought they had clinched their argument *from Scripture*. Here they cite a wealth of Bible material against the Lutherans. So here Melanchthon is forced to engage in an exegetical debate, not only stating the Lutheran principle of interpretation but actually practicing it, as he countercriticizes the alternative exegesis of his Roman opponents. What constitutes the one article of Christian theology also becomes the one principle and key for interpreting the Scriptures. It is normative for the entire Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation if one wants to understand them the way they themselves wish to be understood. The Reformers' conviction that this was the "sole" principle for going at Scripture was founded partly on the fact that the discovery of its *solus* character in all theology had come from the Scriptures themselves, as Luther had wrestled with them in his lectures on Psalms and Romans. It was *not* a pet idea that Luther had concocted and then tried to apply to the Bible. It was by way of Biblical study that he had been overwhelmed by the heart of God's message to people, the Word of God who is Jesus Christ, the gratuitous righteousness of God. If the heart of the message is this one fundamental article, then any book claiming to be God's Word must also have this one fundamental article as its heart. If the Gospel is the heart of the Bible, then either we have to know this heart ahead of time before we go study the Scriptures, or we shall have to discover it during the very process of our Scriptural study, or we shall not be getting to the heart of the matter. This makes the Gospel of the gracious righteousness of God the key to the Scriptures. Without this key we can never really get "in" on what is going on in the Book. We may work around the Bible all our lives, but without this key it is a closed book.

In Article IV of the Apology, Melanchthon denies that his

opponents have this key. They do come to talk about Christ, he says, but the upshot of what they do is to “bury Christ.” When they stumble upon the key, they cover it up. They put the resurrected Christ back into the tomb (17 f., 81).⁴ At one point Melanchthon says that he is amazed “that our opponents are unmoved by the many passages in the Scriptures that clearly attribute justification to faith,” i.e., announce the one and chief article. He wonders whether they perhaps think that “these words fell from the Holy Spirit unawares” (107 f.). After reviewing the “main passages which our opponents quote against us,” Melanchthon says in summary that they “maliciously twist the Scriptures to fit their own opinions. They quote many passages in garbled form.” But the reason for it all is that “they omit the clearest Scriptural passages on faith [*the one article of Christianity*], select the passages on works, and even distort these...*They teach the law in such a way as to hide the Gospel of Christ*” (286). And because this is the upshot of Roman exegesis—that the Gospel gets hidden and Christ gets buried—Melanchthon cannot say it is accidental. They must be doing it on purpose, making up their exegesis “to evade the Scriptures” (321). Incredible as it sounds, the official leaders of the church “understand neither the forgiveness of sins nor faith nor grace nor righteousness.” In short, they do not understand “the main doctrine of Christianity” (2f), the one article by which the church stands or falls.

In discussing the key to Scriptures, Melanchthon’s favorite term is *Promise*. In his *Loci communes*, ten years before, he had stated the definition: *Evangelium est promissio*. This is an important shift from what the word *Gospel* had regularly meant in medieval theology. Of course the term was used, but it was defined differently. It was viewed as *philosophia coelestis*, or the *lex Christi*, or the historical report of Christ’s biography. Of course the Gospel is a historical report, but it is more. It

contains a compelling assertion about *today* (contemporary history) and not simply about yesterday. And even more it is "Promise," because it says something about future history, revealing the potentiality of what is to come—a potentiality that points beyond the "now" and the "here." Viewing the Gospel as a promise moves it away from the "I-it" relationship, as though it were a "thing"—information, rules, reports, even *divine* information, *divine* rules, *divine* reports—and defines it in terms of an "I-Thou" relationship. For whenever I encounter a promise, it is the promissor himself (not an it, but a person) with whom I am actually dealing, and I know it. The promise calls to my attention a present reality, piece of history, about the promissor and also future possibilities with the promissor to which this promise points. There is a parallel on the human level in the promise to marry. Not an it but a thou, a person, is the focal point of the promise. The present tense of the promise signifies his trustworthiness and my confidence in his trustworthiness. Future consequences are the prospect of marriage and a future history with the promissor. And when the future time of marriage comes, that too is sealed with another promise of fidelity which again has the person-to-person focus, the present pledge and confidence in the pledge, and the future prospect of this pledge and confidence lived out.

Melanchthon got the word *Promise* especially from St. Paul and the Epistle to the Hebrews where the term is used of God and His people under both old and new covenants. St. Paul himself contrasts "Promise" with "Law." In fact it is more explicitly Pauline to speak in terms of Law and Promise than of Law and Gospel, for Paul never explicitly juxtaposes the latter two terms. In any case, for Melanchthon the Reformation understanding of the one chief article of Christianity is called "Promise," and anything in the relations between God and people that is not Promise is "Law." So also anything that the Bible

says about God and people must be either Law or Promise—unless there were some third, neutral category of God-people relations, which the Confessions do not allow. So Melanchthon says: “All Scripture should be divided into these two chief doctrines, the law and the promises. In some places it presents the law. In others it presents the promise of Christ.” (5)

“Of these two doctrines our opponents select the law” (7) and set up their theology from that. That is the distinctive hermeneutic principle of the Confutation. Theoretically that might be justified, if there were two alternatives in Scripture from which one could choose to concentrate on one and subordinate the other. But Melanchthon’s point is that in choosing the Law as the hermeneutical key they do not merely subordinate the Promise, but they bury Him who is the Promise incarnate.

When Melanchthon says, on the other hand, that the Scriptural key for the Lutheran hermeneutics is the Promise, he does not fear that, as with the Law, there will be a corresponding kind of burying. On the contrary, the Scriptural assertions about God’s expectations of us are not buried but are brought to full fruition. After I have encountered the Promise, it then becomes possible for me to begin keeping the Law, not only in its second table but also in its first and prior table of “fearing, loving, trusting God.”

So a Promise-centered hermeneutics opens up both the legal and the promissive material in Scripture. A Law-centered hermeneutics actually destroys both. Not only does it bury the Promise, but in burying the Promise it makes impossible the keeping of the Law as well. Thereby both words of God are wasted. In Melanchthon’s recurrent phrase, they are “in vain.”

A legal hermeneutics is not just an intellectual error, an

accidental misreading of the Scriptures. Connected with such a hermeneutics, if not in fact the ground of its being, is the fact that "natural humanity" (any normal sinner) is naturally drawn to such a hermeneutics. "People naturally trust their own righteousness" (20). "This wicked idea about works has always clung to the world" (206). "We know how repulsive this teaching [the promise] is to the judgment of reason" (230). "This legalistic opinion [*opinio legis*] clings by nature to the minds of people, and it cannot be driven out unless we are divinely taught." Needed is a turn "from such fleshly opinions to the Word of God" (265 f.). "By nature people judge that God ought to be appeased by works" (393). A legal hermeneutics is therefore not just an intellectual error, but it is ultimately a function of the sinful person. The very fact that it is so automatically attractive to me ought to be the red flag warning me to beware. What Melanchthon is here saying is that the natural person already has a "way of interpreting Scriptures"—and it is a bad one. It must be destroyed and replaced by a hermeneutical key which is as audacious as the Promise itself.

Melanchthon says that the very legal material in the Scriptures already contradicts the hermeneutics of legalism. He notes that "all the Scriptures and the church proclaim that the law cannot be satisfied. The incipient keeping of the law does not please God for its own sake, but for the sake of faith in Christ. Without this, the law always accuses us" (*lex semper accusat*, 166 f.). (Notice the "saintly sins" of which even the best Christians are guilty when the Law accuses them, 167 f.). This leads Melanchthon to posit what he calls a "rule...[that] interprets all the passages...on law and works" (185). The rule is: To all the statements about the Law and works "we must *add*" that the "law cannot be kept without Christ" and that "faith is necessary" (184). There is the audacity of the Lutheran

hermeneutics: “adding” things to Scripture. Melanchthon asserts that this is the way Scripture itself treats the Law. “The Scriptures...praise works in such a way as not to remove the free promise” (188).

In another place Melanchthon can call for considering “passages in their context” (280). The context he has in mind is not simply the receding and succeeding passages (although he finds Roman exegesis often guilty here). But the context of Melanchthon’s own statement shows that he has in mind the *theological* context, the context finally of the whole redemptive work of God. This notion of the theological context of any Biblical passage leads to his statements about “adding” something to a Bible passage. It seems at first that Melanchthon commits the very same fallacy of addition of which he had accused his opponents, the only difference being in the *content* of his particular addition. He notes that they add the *opinion legis* when treating legal passages and that most often they completely ignore promissive passages (264). Melanchthon himself says, however, that Christ must be added to the total exegesis of a passage if for some reason He is not there originally. When the Confutation gives what we might call a “straight” exegesis of certain legal passages, Melanchthon replies that in preaching (interpreting) the Law there are two things we must always keep in mind: to wit, Christ is needed for anyone to keep the Law, and outward works done without Christ do not please God (256). Then he says, “It is necessary to add the Gospel promise” (257). A bit later, and still on the same subject, he says, “The preaching of the Gospel must be added” (260). When the confuters quote Luke 11.41 (“in garbled form”) to show that almsgiving makes a person clean, Melanchthon responds: “Our opponents must be deaf. Over and over we say that the Gospel of Christ must be added to the preaching of the law” (281).

This is one rule of interpretation which Melanchthon says must

be maintained by virtue of what the New Testament itself says. In support he quotes John 15.5 (“Apart from me you can do nothing”) and Hebrews 11.6 (“Without faith it is impossible to please God,” 372). So in an exegetical situation which without reference to faith in Christ calls for people to do good works and to please God, faith in the righteousness of Christ *must be added* to the Bible passage *because the Bible itself demands it*.

By using this principle Melanchthon is able to take what is supposedly the most embarrassing Bible passage for Lutherans, James 2.24 (“You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone”) and show that “this text is more against our opponents than against us” (245).

What is striking about this Lutheran hermeneutics is that it is not first of all based on intellectual principles—like scientific admonitions to be open-minded and unprejudiced, to look at the grammar, syntax, forms of literature, *Weltanschauung* in which the message is couched, etc, but is based on theological principles and convictions, namely, that the ultimate Word of God is Promise and therefore must be present in the written Word.

The counterpart to this theological conviction about the nature and content of what God wants to communicate is the Reformers’ constant theological presupposition about the hearer, the listener, the exegete, who is on the receiving end of a piece of interpreted Scripture. It is the Reformers’ theological conviction that one is either an out-and-out sinner and nothing more, or one is the only other alternative, a sinner-saint, a Christian. Most often Melanchthon has the sinner-saint in mind as the one on the receiving end of his Biblical interpretation. In the practice of exegesis this consideration and evaluation of the person on the receiving end also functions like something of a “hermeneutic rule” in Apology IV. The rule runs something

along this line: Only that is a valid interpretation of the written Word which is helpful to the eventual receiver. It does not begin to be helpful until the receiver hears, first, *that* the text is talking about the receiver—better, that God is talking to the receiver about the receiver—and then hears *what* God is saying to the receiver about the receiver.

Now one might come to the conclusion that following these principles would lead to a very short-lived study of the Bible. Once a person had learned what the Gospel was, he would have finished. He would know it all, and that would be that. But that is not the case with the actual Christian whom Melanchthon has in mind. This Christian, though he is God's saint, is still plagued by "saintly" sins (167). So what Christians need to have, and what God wants them to receive from the Scriptures, is help on how to *use* Christ. Now that the Christian knows Christ, the Christian needs to learn how to let both the Law and the Promise move into the Christian's life—the Law to expose those areas where his idolatry is still thriving, the Promise to have Christ take over those areas and have them function as sectors of redeemed creation and not of the condemned old creation. Christians must be told—and that, as in John 20.31, is the Scriptures' own objective—how faith comes into being, how the Holy Spirit is given, how regeneration takes place, how good works can be done. The purpose is not that they will have the right answer for the great final examination but rather that they can have that answer happening in their own lives now. Melanchthon's answer to such "how" questions is regularly expressed as "using Christ." "Christ is mediator," he says, but "how will Christ be the mediator if we do not use him as mediator in our justification?" (69). "The Gospel...compels us to make use of Christ in justification" (291). "Christ's glory becomes brighter when we teach people to make use of him as mediator and propitiator" (299). That this does not just mean

using Christ when we are initially converted or saved is clear from Melanchthon's favored phrase: *Christus manet mediator*. Christ has to *remain* mediator, or else even the Christians would be lost, for the saintly sins cited above are still exposed by the corollary: *Lex semper accusat*, even in Christians. Another frequently repeated notion is that we need to be taught how to use Christ against the wrath of God which threatens our old Adam. And as far as lawkeeping is concerned, the Christian "still" needs Christ's help "to keep the law" (299). One of the most critical assertions by Melanchthon against Roman exegesis is that "they do not teach us to use Christ as the mediator" (313).

Because the Roman hermeneutics allows people to bypass Jesus Christ, yes, even bury Him, it comes as no surprise that Melanchthon sees the same hermeneutic principles operating in Roman exegesis which had operated in first-century Pharisaic Judaism. Judaism was the first to bypass Jesus Christ and also to bury Him. On one occasion Melanchthon says: "This is what we condemn in our opponents' position, that by interpreting such passages of the Scriptures in...a Jewish manner they eliminate from them the righteousness of faith and Christ, the mediator" (376). Or in a moment of righteous wrath: "Cursed be our opponents, those Pharisees, who interpret the law in such a way that...[people have] access to the Father...without Christ, the mediator" (269). It was surely this parallel between their conflict with Rome and Jesus' own conflict with Pharisaic Judaism that added weight to the Reformers' conviction that their hermeneutics was valid. A classical document which consciously observes this parallelism in action is Luther's larger commentary on Galatians (1535). The premise here is that Luther's hermeneutics is Paul's hermeneutics, yes, is Christ's own hermeneutics.

One last observation might still be drawn from Apology IV.

Melanchthon is conscious that he is working with an interpretation of Scripture different from the one his opponents employ. But is his interpretation really so distinctively new? It is not, according to Melanchthon himself. Together with Luther he asserts that this hermeneutics was Jesus' own as He battled with Judaism, and Paul's own, and John's (5.39), and that of the author of Hebrews, et al.; and he adds that it was also the working method of interpretation among the fathers of the church and among the common Christians who make up the span from the first to the 16th century. He cites numerous church fathers to this effect.

But this is not the clinching argument which convinces Melanchthon that the Reformers' hermeneutics is valid, namely the mere fact that it has been in practice, at least in some places, throughout the history of the church. What makes this hermeneutics convincingly valid is that it serves the worship of that Christ whom the Quasimodogeniti Gospel reminds us is "my Lord and my God." The greatest worship of Christ is to use Him and His benefits for the purpose God intended—in the words of the same Gospel lection, "that you might have life in his name."

Perhaps there are other operating procedures for exegesis in our time which are not identical with those the Reformers utilize. There are no *a priori* reasons why one could not use the tools of source criticism and *Formgeschichte* and still be interpreting the Scriptures in keeping with these Lutheran hermeneutic principles. But any hermeneutics, however critical or simple or orthodox, if it commits the fallacy which Melanchthon saw committed by the Confutation of his day, will have to be rejected, not because Luther says so nor even because the Confessions say so, but because it buries Christ. Conversely, the only reason there is a Christian church engaged in interpreting the Scriptures at all is that Christ is not buried but "is arisen"—"that we might have life in his name."

1. Lindsay Dewar, *The Holy Spirit and Modern Thought* (New York, 1959), p. 125.

2. Here and elsewhere below are reflected perspectives formulated in Joachim Beckmann, "Die Bedeutung der reformatorischen Entdeckung des Evangeliums für die Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift," *Luther*, XXXIV (1963), 20-30.

3. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans, and ed. Theodore G. Tappert in collaboration with Jaroslav Pelikan, Robert H. Fischer, and Arthur C. Piepkorn (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg [Fortress] Press, 1959), p. 98.

4. These and all other subsequent numbers refer to the numbered paragraphs in Apology IV. Quotations are from the Tappert edition.

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